OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE MAKING OF SHRIMPY

By Grace Sartwell Mason

LITTLE Hans Brinkman, otherwise known to the gang as Shrimpy Brinkman, was being slowly consumed by a secret sorrow. He was a person of no consequence. The knowledge of this fact caused him the keenest suffering. It was small consolation to reflect that he had finally, by silent endurance, become a tolerated member of Licorice-leg's "gang." In that gang he had no standing, no distinction.

'Most every fellow, he reflected, dolefully, had something to brag about. Reddy Barlow had had appendicitis; Gumdrop could eat ten tea biscuits at a sitting; Billy Green possessed a father who was the Sheriff and had once hanged a man; Slim Cannon owned a goat; Curly Bright played the jew's-harp like a seraph—and so on through the list.

In the dark, thinking it over, he often devised ingenious situations and got the keenest pleasure from contemplating himself variously as a life-saver, a public benefactor, or possibly a desperately wicked man. His blue eyes shone with inspiration in these heroic moments; but the next morning he was merely Shrimpy Brinkman, a near-sighted, stubby-haired, narrow-chested, solemn little German. But there came a day—alack for the pitfalls of human ambition!—when Shrimpy fell foul of a great idea, and in his final downfall worked out his own salvation.

There was in Shrimpy's town a Professor Micah Greenleaf, a tall, stoop-shouldered pedagogue with an overweening vanity and a consequent distaste for rivalry in his particular role of wise man of the place. He had, nevertheless, a rival, and a rival he disliked particularly, in Shrimpy's father, Brinkman, Sr., was an antiquarian and a scholar. He had a thoroughgoing Teutonic scorn for dabblers in any branch of learning. When the Professor went in for authropology, and especially the lore of the American Indian, the scorn of Brinkman, Sr., became Jove-like. He owned a rather famous collection of Indian relics, and the Professor, in choosing his latest fad, was trespassing on Brinkman's pet specialty. Relations between the two middle-aged scholars became finally rather strained, because of the fact that Brinkman was continually urging the Professor to study the famous Brinkman collection if he would really learn something about Indian lore. The Professor found this attitude intolerable. Stung in his vanity, he determined to have a collection of his own.

Now Shrimpy's town is set in the midst of a section rich in legends of the Iroquois: with more zeal than knowledge the Professor began at once to scour the countryside for relics. Being not too fond of hard work, he pressed into service a dozen of his grammar school pupils—and this is where Shrimpy and Licorice-legs and Reddy Barlow come in. To these three and to other members of that gang of which Licorice-legs was the guiding star the Professor was known as Aroowhead Mike, yet they looked upon his latest hobby with tolerance, for it frequently meant no lessons on Friday afternoon—the day when they all went relic hunting. On any fine Friday in that autumn the Professor could be seen with his disciples, rambling over the countryside, his ancient frock coat flapping in the breeze, a geologist's hammer in his hand and an acquisitive light in his eyes.

It was on one of these afternoons that the Professor made his first discovery, and Shrimpy was struck by his great idea. The expedition had wandered far afield; supper time was drawing near and there was a noticeable waning of interest in the ranks. Licorice-legs and Reddy Barlow had wandered off in the direction of a line of willows which bordered the dry bed of a creek. They disappeared from sight for a time and then appeared, hastening toward the Professor.

"Oh, P'fessor!" they called, "Bettcher we've found an Indian fort or earthworks, or somethin'! It looks just like the pictures, anyway. It's over there behind those willows."

They all hurried toward the willows, the Professor in the lead. As he approached the long, grassy mound his face became interested. He examined the base of the embankment and scrambled to the top. As he walked along its ridge he became more and more excited. With the skirts of his coat fluttering in the wind he finally announced to his followers that they had made a discovery of the greatest importance. Undoubtedly, he declared, these were the remains of Iroquois earthworks!

"I jest bettcher," speculated his followers, getting their imaginations to work, "this is where Blue Snake fit the Cayugas! Bettcher there's arrowheads and things in there, an' mebbe bones! Mebbe the bones of Blue Snake himself!"

But, in spite of the excitement, the hour was so late that it was decided to put off further investigation until the following Friday—and the gang started home stepping high, to spread the news of the finding of an Iroquois mound.

When Brinkman, Sr., heard of the discovery, he retired to the depths of his bookshop and laughed, consumedly.

"Ach Himmel!" he thought, "I know that mound; I discovered it once myself! It is the embankment of the old Comstock mill—but shall I say so? Ach, no! Let him dig!"

Now, whatever Brinkman, Sr., might think of the relic hunters, his son stuck by the Professor. He was loyal, not so much in the interests of the American Indian, but because the idea had occurred to him that in this direction there lay a vague chance of glory. If he, Shrimpy, could uncover to the light of day some sort of relic, the gang might take notice of him. He knew that Jimmy Morrison, when he discovered an Onondaga pipe bowl, was treated as a hero and allowed to show off his find all the way up Main Street. Shrimpy pictured to himself the rapture of digging up, say, a ceremonial stone of the Senecas; of handing it carelessly to the Professor, of leaning easily on his spade while the gang crowded about to wonder and admire!

The next Friday the Professor and his disciples started with unusual eagerness to explore their new discovery. The Professor's determination to prove his theory right had been stimulated by the conduct of his rival, who had stood in the doorway of his shop as the expedition passed that afternoon and chuckled, meaningly. His helpers urged to redoubled effort, swarmed over the mound all that afternoon, digging, boasting, and chattering. Hardest of them all worked Shrimpy, with the hope of glory in his heart.

"SHRIMPY LEANED ON HIS SHOVEL AS HE HAD DREAMED THAT HE WOULD."

But alas! supper time came and there had been only two incidents to mark the afternoon; Reddy Barlow had dug up a sheep's jaw bone, and Gumdrop, not proportioned to manual labor, had been laid under the willows to recover from what Slip Cannon called a "stroke of work." That was all; they had found nothing of Indian character, and the Professor's ancient rival still had a handle for his scorn.

Yet, when the Professor led them homeward he declared he still had hopes of proving his contention in regard to the nature of the mound and would continue the search on the following Friday. Sadly Shrimpy followed among the others. He had been last to give up the search for relics and he was bitterly disappointed to be going home thus undistinguished, when he had dreamed of treading triumphantly at their head flaunting at least a Seneca arrowhead. He dragged his small shovel disconsolately, and looked with a wistful eye at Licorice-legs. Licorice-legs had such a way with him; the fellows never played disconcerting jokes on him; they never said he was like a baby lobster!

Just here, at this most depressing moment, the great idea struck Shrimpy. He was breathless at the very audacity of his inspiration, and yet he turned it over and over in his fascinated mind until it possessed him completely. It was too big to grapple with alone; he could not hold it—he must share it with some one. He was so intoxicated with his idea that he walked boldly up to Licorice-legs and demanded a private interview.

"Reddy, too," said Licorice-legs; "he's my chum an' he's in what I'm in."

Shrimpy assented, willingly. The three of them sought the shelter of the river bridge, under which was an ideal spot for conspirators—deeply shady, with the brown water slipping softly over the stones at their feet. Here they crouched while Shrimpy revealed his inspiration. At the end of a minute or two Reddy was rolling on the stones with irresponsible glee and Licorice-legs' black eyes were showing sparks of fire. Shrimpy Brinkman had become at one bound a genius to be reckoned with.

"Oh, Shrimpy!" they chuckled, "how did you ever happen to think of it? Do you think you'll dast to do it, Shrimpy?"

Uplifted by their admiration, Shrimpy felt he dared do anything; he elaborated his plan to them.

"There'll be one for each of us," he said. "The other fellers'll be just green when they see us diggin' 'em up, an' most likely the P'fessor will give me a medal, for I'm to find the first one" (he was careful to explain), "an' then you fellers c'n discover yours."

"Oh, cricky!" his hearers sighed with rapture. "It'll be great!"

"Of course you'll cross-your-hearts-hope-to-die that you'll give 'em back to me?" added Shrimpy, a trifle anxiously.

"Oh, sure," they assented; and the three conspirators went home to supper.

The week that followed was the happiest Shrimpy Brinkman had ever known. He was openly taken into fellowship by the two most powerful members of the gang. Licorice-legs walked with an arm over his shoulder; Reddy Barlow allowed him to load his dog Spotty; between the three of them there existed a mysterious secret that nearly drove the rest of the gang to desperation with envy. Shrimpy's small pink face lost its look of deprecating wistfulness; he stepped out manfully beside the captain of the gang as one who has come at last into a proper appreciation of himself.

With the first crowing of cocks, on the next Friday morning, earlier even than the early risers about him, Shrimpy Brinkman was out of his bed. His toilet was of the briefest, for he had slept in his clothes, in great discomfort, but upheld by the reflection that thus slept all heroes on the eve of perilous undertakings. With great care he made his way downstairs and through the queer shadows of the bookshop. The terrifying unusualness of the hour and a dawning realization of his own recklessness parched his throat and made his heart pound horribly. But he did not turn back. He slipped out the shop's side door and scuttled down the street. His jacket bulged over something he held which he clutched carefully against his ribs. Straight to Licorice-legs' house he quickly sped, and crept under a certain window from which two strings were hanging to the ground. With the eyes of faith he saw the other end of the strings attached, as per agreement, to the respective big toes of Licorice-legs and Reddy. He jerked them, and a subdued "Ouch!" came to his ears, followed immediately by the faces of his fellow conspirators, looking down at him, grinning mistily. After exchanging a few dramatic whispers they joined Shrimpy by way of the wood-shed roof. The trio crept down the street and made for the open fields.

They did not talk much; they felt, in fact, rather subdued. They had never seen the friendly fields in such ghostly guise before. Tags of mist swept before the first breeze of the dawn; their feet were entangled in cobwebs heavy with the dew; a cow arose from her bed of ferns, looming up before the startled three like an elephant through the mist.

"I don't see what we come so early for," said Reddy with a slight quaver.

"Phoo! I ain't afraid," retorted Licorice-legs. "It's gettin' lighter all the time."

Across two more fields and a turnip patch and the willows came into view, hiding the Professor's Iroquois mound. "You go first," said Reddy.

But the other two hung back. There was something about this business of digging into an Indian mound in the ghostly dawn that chilled their enthusiasm. It was finally decided that Shrimpy ought to go first, being the instigator of the venture, anyway. Shrimpy did not like it; but hidden somewhere in his thin frame, he had a touch of the Spartan. He set his teeth, clutched at the bulge in his jacket and turned the corner of the willows. There was nothing so scary about the mound after all. Reddy produced his shovel and they took turns at digging. They dug three shallow holes, covered them carefully with sod, marked the places, and looked at each other, grinning. They were justified in their pride for most artistically they had salted the Professor's Indian mound with three of the choicest relics from Brinkman, Sr.'s, famous collection.

That afternoon the Professor started out with guileless eagerness to make a last search for relics in the mound. After two or three brushes during the week with his smilingly sarcastic rival, he was grimly determined to make his theory good. If digging could prove the mound of Iroquois origin, Iroquois it should be proven. There was a feverish note in his voice when, having arrived at the mound, he urged speed and industry upon his followers. The gang responded light-heartedly.

Side by side worked Reddy and Licorice-legs and Shrimpy. The first two seemed consumed with some secret merriment; they were continually digging each other in the ribs and giggling. But Shrimpy, his face flushed with excitement wielded his shovel in nervous silence.

Suddenly he threw down the shovel, stopped and then stood up. In his hand he held a curiously carved piece of pottery. The other searchers crowded about him. Shrimpy leaned on his shovel as he had dreamed that he would; he held his find up nonchalantly—but he was speechless at his own audacity and dizzy on the sudden height of importance to which he had leaped. His blue eyes were enormous behind his spectacles; his knees trembled.

"A carved water bowl!" the Professor cried. "The finest specimen I have ever seen. My dear boys! This will prove my theory that the Iroquois were as advanced in the arts as the Zunis! A most fortunate find, Hans! This will prove beyond a doubt—"

But at this point twin shouts arose from Licorice-legs and Reddy. They had discovered treasures, and they, like Hans, leaned nonchalantly on their shovels while they held up to envious eyes a rabbit pipe and a queerly carved stone.

If the Professor was excited before he was beside himself now. He was almost incoherent with the number of things the rabbit pipe and the carved stone would prove; he recklessly offered a quarter to the boy who would discover the next relic. Thus incited by hope of reward and by a burning envy, the rest of the gang fell upon the mount until it looked as if an army of wood-chucks had chosen it for a tenement house.

But Shrimpy and Licorice-legs and Reddy dug no more. Indeed, Reddy and Licorice-legs were incapacitated for work by their frequent seizures of laughter, which made it necessary for them to retire behind the willows and lie down. Shrimpy wasted no time away from the scene of his success. He strolled about, swelling noticeably, and offering advice to the other searchers. His soul expanded in the sunlight of their envy; he put his hands in his pockets in imitation of Licorice-legs and spoke patronizingly when they besought him to point out likely places in which to dig.

"Aw," he said, "you've got to tell by the feel of the ground; that's the way I did."

At the end of the afternoon even the most persistent had thrown down his shovel in despair and the expedition turned homeward, for it was admitted by the Professor that no more relics were to be found. Shrimpy walked among them on the homeward way, expatiating glibly on the method employed in searching for relics. He and Reddy and Licorice-legs were proudly carrying their spoils at the head of the procession as they approached the town, when suddenly the Professor stopped.

"Let me take them a moment, boys," he said, and wrested the bowl, the pipe, and the curious stone from their unwilling hands. He darted ahead of them eagerly. To Shrimpy's horror he made straight for the shop of Brinkman, Sr.

Shrimpy turned an agonized look upon his companions in guilt, but they, after the manner of accomplices, drew away from him when exposure seemed imminent. Shrimpy saw the Professor disappear within his father's shop and his heart sank in a sickening manner. His father was a strong disciplinarian. While he was considering if he might not better run away, miles and miles, he was being pushed up by the boys behind him up to the open door of the bookshop, where he stood with the others, a quaking observer of the Professor's encounter with his rival.

"Um Gotteswillen!" cried Brinkman when he saw the relics the Professor proudly displayed. "You find them in that mill-mound? Vy—impossible!"

He examined the relics. His amazement grew until he became apoplectic over the water bowl.

"Vy!" he cried, "this bowl is Aztec! See the Aztec plotograph for vater. Vair did you get him? Vair? Nod in that mill-mound—impossible!"

He stared at the Professor with red-faced suspicion. The Professor was slightly nonplussed, but triumphant. Brinkman snatched up the carved stone; his eyes bulged as he examined it.

"Du lieber Himmel!" he said, weakly, "this is Zuni! How could you find a ceremonial stone of the Zunis in an Iroquois mound?"

The two antiquarians glared at each other. Brinkman, Sr., was breathing hard as he bent over the water bowl.

"It is Aztec!" he declared.

"It is Iroquois!" retorted the Professor.

There was a pause. Outside the shop the Professor's followers pressed forward with interested grins. Inside, Brinkman, Sr., wrinkled his brow and puffed out his lips over the beautiful lines of the water bowl.

"I have seen it before!" he cried, suddenly, and hastened to the other end of the shop, where his precious collection reposed behind glass doors. His practiced eye swept the shelves. A terrible German exclamation burst from him. His Aztec bowl, his Zuni ceremonial stone, his rare Miami pipe, were gone!

It was a dreadful moment that followed. The Teutonic wrath of Brinkman, Sr., filled the shop and seered the row of boys outside. It shriveled the very soul of Shrimpy and caused a sickening sensation in the stomach pits of Licorice-legs and Reddy. They were convinced that Shrimpy would drag them into it; he was just the white-livered kind of fellow, they told themselves, that would do it, and they guessed at what would happen to them then—the Sheriff would get them, most likely.

"Vat I vant to know is who took my relics?" Brinkman was thundering under the nose of the dismayed Professor, when he heard a small voice at his elbow, saying: "I took them, father."

A mighty relief surged in the hearts of Licorice-legs and Reddy. Shrimpy had not told on them; he was evidently not going to, for he stood looking up at his father in a wan silence which was someway not the silence of a boy who intends implicating half the gang to spread his own guilt thinner. Reddy and Licorice-legs, knowing what they knew, felt a passionate thankfulness that they were not in Shrimpy's shoes.

What with bewilderment and indignation, Brinkman, Sr., was extremely terrifying, as he stared down at his son and begged to know why, why he should have done such a thing.

"I wanted to dig them up," said Shrimpy.

"You vanted to dig—you vanted to—you—mein lieber Gott! Did you bury them in the Professor's mound?"

Shrimpy nodded. Words were impossible. He had reached the depths of humiliation. The sting of the moment lay not so much in fear of the heavy Teutonic hand as in the painful way he could feel that row of staring eyes behind him. It seemed to burn into his humiliated back, that concentrated gaze of the gang.

His eyes traveled miserably from the floor to his father's face, and for a moment he was distracted from his own troubles. Brinkman, Sr., was purple with some emotion that threatened to strangle him. He spluttered and gasped and then fell into a chair, roaring with laughter. The mighty sound of it filled the shop; it rasped the nerves of the Professor until the only dignified thing left for him to do was to leave the presence of his mirthful rival. He stalked out with one look of utter distaste at both father and son. The row of boys melted away after him. If they had lingered they would have seen Shrimpy's father with tears of laughter in his eyes, looking at his son with a new admiration.

"Hans, mein Liebling," he said impressively, "I vill an antiquary make out of you yet!"

But since he was a German father, he punished his son, dutifully. That mattered little to Shrimpy, however. The chastisement was a singularly light one. What remained with him was an utter, dismal sense of failure. He had hatched a gorgeous scheme, and it had failed, in the very presence of the gang.

From his bedroom window later Shrimpy looked out on the scented autumn twilight. Half an hour before the gang had been in the Square playing pom-pon-pull-away. Their voices had come up to him, and the sound of Curly Bright's jew's-harp. They had all gone, now. Maybe they were sitting on the steps of the post office, talking; or perhaps they had gone down to the shanty to build a fire and roast apples. He shut his mouth and winked his blue eyes hard behind his thick glasses. There was very little to live for, after all. Oh, crackey! What was that?

Some one had thrown a handful of pebbles against the window. He looked out. Licorice-legs and Reddy stood underneath, grinning in a friendly fashion.

"Hi, Shrimpy! come out!" they whispered. "We're goin' to have a corn-roast down by the mill. You come along an' help us coop the corn, will you, Shrimpy?"

There was a new note in their voices. They spoke as to an equal. Shrimpy threw one leg over the window sill preparatory to descending by way of the trellis.

"I dunno but I'd just as soon," he said.